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SUBJECT: NEW ZEALAND ELECTION 2008 - THE CHINESE VOTE

Classified By: Consul General John Desrocher for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

This message was drafted by ConGen Auckland and approved by Embassy Wellington.

¶1. (C) Summary. Asians make up nearly 10% of New Zealand's population, and most of them are Chinese. Chinese are underrepresented in national politics, with only one member of parliament. While Asian representation in parliament may improve this year because parties are diversifying their lists, New Zealand is likely to have only one more parliamentarian of Chinese heritage after November's election. End summary.

Two Chinese Communities

¶2. (SBU) Asians have surpassed Pacific Islanders to become New Zealand's third-largest ethnic group, after Pakeha (Europeans) and Maori. They make up 9.7% of the country's population, expected to grow to 16% in twenty years. Two-thirds of New Zealand's Asians live in the Auckland region; more than half identify themselves as Chinese.

¶3. (SBU) New Zealand's Chinese can be divided between those with deep roots in the country and more recent arrivals. Members of the first group trace their ancestry to the market gardeners and Otago gold miners that arrived in New Zealand as far back as the mid-19th century. Their forebears suffered overt racism and often toiled in poverty on the margins of society.

¶4. (SBU) Members of this group to this day often keep a low political profile. While many enjoy a standard of living their grandparents could not have dreamed of, they often stay loyal to the Labour Party. They remember Labour as the social welfare party that was most ready to help the working class and as the most racially tolerant party. This loyalty is weakening as Chinese Kiwis grow wealthier and as the National Party leaves race-baiting in its past.

¶5. (C) The 70% of Chinese who arrived in New Zealand after 1991 make up the second group. Auckland University Professor Manying Ip calls this group "the 1.5 generation." They were brought to New Zealand as children or young adults or were born here of recent immigrant parents. Very often they come

from families with means. Many are professionals and live well. While they too want to settle and raise families, they are less concerned than the first group with blending in. Ip describes them as "well-educated...and highly aware of their rights." It was this group that swelled the pro-China demonstration in Auckland during the controversy earlier this year over the Olympic torch relay.

Few Chinese Faces in Parliament

¶6. (SBU) While Asians, and Chinese particularly, are well represented in local politics, they are poorly represented at the national level. Only one of New Zealand's 120 members of parliament is of Chinese heritage. MPs and party leaders (particularly in the Labour Party) tend to be veterans of the party going back to their university days who went to Wellington and starting climbing the party ladder not long after their studies were finished. Most of New Zealand's Chinese are recent arrivals who haven't had time to get very far up the ladder.

¶7. (SBU) The introduction of proportional representation (MMP) in parliamentary elections in 1996 increased politicians' interest in minority communities. That year the lone current Chinese MP, National's Pansy Wong, was plucked from Christchurch local politics and put on the National Party list. Asians were sufficiently emboldened by MMP to launch a pair of ethnic parties for the 1996 election, but neither gained significant support. Both quickly disbanded and no strictly Asian parties have been launched since.

¶8. (SBU) Wong remains New Zealand's best known Chinese politician. She will battle for an electorate seat in the 2008 election in the Auckland constituency of Botany. In 2005, Wong failed to unseat Labour MP Judith Tizard from the Auckland Central electorate. Wong entered parliament as a list, rather than as an electorate, MP. (No Asian candidate has ever successfully contested an electorate seat.) National expects the Botany electorate to prove friendly ground for Wong. It is a new electorate without an incumbent, and it has the second-largest Asian population of any electorate (and 80% of those Asians are Chinese).

¶9. (C) Until recently, it appeared that both of the major parties would choose Chinese candidates to contest the Botany electorate. As noted, National would run Wong, and the Labour Party was expected to reach beyond its core and tap lawyer and radio personality Raymond Huo, a Beijing native, as its candidate for Botany. The ACT Party, New Zealand's equivalent of a European liberal democratic party, is also likely to run a Chinese candidate in Botany, former MP Kenneth Wang. In a last minute switch, however, Labour chose a little-known Auckland University professor named Koro Tawa over Huo to contest the Botany electorate.

¶10. (C) Huo nonetheless remains Labour's most important Chinese candidate. Despite not getting the nod to run in Botany, Huo was given a far higher place on the party list than Tawa. Indeed, Huo placed higher on the list than a number of veteran Labour MPs. In a meeting with the CG, Huo's lack of partisan passion was notable. While paying lip service to Labour policies, his remarks suggested he was drawn into politics not to support a particular ideology, but because the Chinese community's voice "was not being heard." Huo argued that National's Wong "does not connect well" with most Chinese New Zealanders because she's from Hong Kong and speaks Cantonese rather than Mandarin.

¶11. (C) Wang served as a list MP for ACT from 2002 from 2005, but lost his seat when ACT's poor performance in 2005 left it with only two seats. Wang argues that ACT, because of its emphasis on free market principles, draws well from the business-oriented Chinese community. Also, like Huo, Wang told the CG that Wong is "not Chinese enough" and that Botany's Chinese would prefer a Mandarin speaker like himself to a Cantonese speaker like Wong.

Law and Order

¶12. (C) Wong's chances will be boosted by a spate of crimes against Asians in South Auckland. Over the span of a few days in June, an Indian liquor store owner was shot to death in his shop, an elderly Chinese woman was murdered in her home by an intruder, and another Chinese woman was killed during a purse-snatching. Labour's Huo confirmed that New Zealand Asians believe themselves to be particularly vulnerable to crime. Many run small retail businesses and, added Huo, ethnic stereotypes come into play: criminals believe that Asians carry lots of cash and will respond passively if attacked. Huo admitted that Labour's emphasis on rehabilitation of criminals over punishment goes down poorly in the Chinese community. New Chinese immigrants come from cultures - China, Singapore - where criminals are dealt with much more harshly than in New Zealand, Huo said.

Comment: A Little More Diversity

¶13. (C) Wong's experience and name recognition, National's momentum, and the Chinese community's concern about crime will probably win the day for Wong. Certainly, Labour's decision to run Tawa in Botany instead of Huo suggests Labour has concluded it can't beat Wong. Thus it will run an unknown against Wong so that Huo can enter parliament as a list candidate untainted by a defeat in the Botany electorate. Botany is likely the only electorate an Asian will win, but other Asians are likely to enter parliament as

party list candidates. National has put two new Asians (Indian Kanwal Bakshi and Korean Melissa Lee) high enough on its list that they will get seats if National performs well. As noted, Huo has been given a high enough place on Labour's list to virtually assure his entry to parliament, as has a new Indian candidate, Rajen Prasad. Current Labour list MP Ahmed Chaudhry, despite an unimpressive record, has also maintained a place on the party list high enough to ensure his return to parliament. So, if the results unfold as currently expected, the new parliament will have six Asian members (two Chinese), vice the two Asian MPs in parliament today. End comment.

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